

Angela Friska: I am no longer ashamed of my disability

Angela Friska is a disabled person working as a consultant whose specific assignment is to manage the program for disabled people in ILO-Better Work Indonesia. She has grown up with a hearing impairment, but her condition has not caused her to withdraw from her surroundings. To the contrary, her disability has encouraged her to relentlessly fight for the rights of disabled people to enjoy equal opportunities in employment.

At the age of eight, Friska, she used to be called, experienced a respiratory disorder (asthma) that compelled frequent doctor visits and copious amounts of medication. Consuming the vast amount of medication in fact worsened her hearing capacity. This was quickly discovered as her parents were forced to constantly repeat words to their little girl and as she began to sing her gospel music in a discordant voice. Ultimately at the age of 10, it was diagnosed that Friska had permanently lost her hearing ability.

At junior high school, she often had to endure humiliation and mockery by her schoolmates. Even worse, there was a female schoolmate that would deliberately touch Friska's hands and then curse and yell at her that she did not want to catch the disease that had led to Friska's disability. During high school, her ordeal grew even worse. School became a routine torment that she had to deal with on a daily basis. Soon Friska became so frustrated with her condition that she withdrew to her room and cried for days.

"They came to apologize and persuade me to return to school. But I simply could not endure any more humiliation. I went straight to my room and left them in the living room. From that day on, I never returned to that school again," Friska said. "If there is something that I regret, it was my attitude that covered up my disability," she added.

Due to the enormous amount of embarrassment, Friska extended the writing and completion of her bachelor thesis in technological engineering to a six-year period. She was simply not confident enough to face her thesis examination. "I thought that I would not be able to hear the examiner's questions clearly. And I was worried that I would break into tears in the examination room because of that unbearable feeling of panic. And even if I passed the examination, what would I then do? Which company would be willing to recruit an employee like me?" she recalled her self-doubt.

However, she felt like she had rediscovered her soul when actively engaging in voluntary works, assisting people being affected by a natural disaster. "The voluntary experiences changed me. Despite of my limitation, I am capable of doing something to benefit her fellow people." From the voluntary work, she is now employed in one of the largest media groups (Femina) in Indonesia as one of their reliable IT staff members.

Her colleagues in the office are aware of her condition and accept Friska's limitations. Normal communication through telephone has now been replaced with e-mail communication. The treatment and acceptance of her disabilities as well as her colleagues' help in rebuilding her self-esteem, has enabled her to accept herself for who she is and allowed her to overcome her traumatic experience.

"No one discriminates against me and I am not embarrassed anymore!" Friska said. As a freelance consultant for the disability program under ILO-Better Work, she intends to raise awareness among the entrepreneurs in the garment industry to encourage them to provide more job opportunities for disabled people. "Disabled people should be able to adapt to non-disabled people, and I trust myself that they can!" Friska smiled. (*)